

ORg? Scientology

Scientology

group searches for corruption

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Attention: city, county, state and federal employees who want to snitch on your bosses about inefficiency, waste or outright criminal fraud, the American Citizens for Honesty in Government is waiting for your confidential call.

It may be wiser, though, to send your photocopied documents through the mail, anonymously. Because if you call, you and the organization may not be the only parties on the line.

The honesty unit is a 4-month-old creation of the Church of Scientology. For at least two decades the church has been a frequent target of federal investigative agencies, including the FBI.

The other day in her new office at 3011 North Interregional, Debbie Sharp laughed easily and lit her third cigarette in twenty minutes. The 26-year-old director of the group sipped a soft drink between puffs and finished a light-hearted tale about being followed across Texas last month by two men in dark business suits.

Sharp and her staff of two were touring Texas cities, standing in front of local federal buildings wearing cardboard Uncle Sam hats and whistles around their necks.

They were passing out leaflets urging federal employees to become "whistleblowers" on waste and corruption in government. The men in dark suits stood nearby, watching, said Sharp, and, on the highway they followed the trio by car.

"We tried to talk to them a couple of times," said Sharp with a wry grin, "but they wouldn't talk. Once, on the road, we slowed to force them to pass. We waved but they didn't wave back."

Her grin was accompanied by a steady, self-assured gaze directly into her visitor's eyes. She used to be a Scientology recruiter, signing up people for self-improvement courses run by the ecumenical "church" that says it has 4 million members worldwide, about 2 million in the United States and about 10,000 in Austin. Now the Waco native, a Southwest Texas University dropout and daughter of an oil company engineer, is starting her first fraud investigation.

"It came from a federal employee we met on the tour," she said. "The lady said she'd been waiting a long time to expose it. We'll check it for accuracy and if it's legitimate, turn it over to the proper legal authorities for prosecution and the press for public exposure."

And if the authorities need a little encouragement, she said with a grin, "we might release it to the press at the same time."

Sharp's lack of investigative experience doesn't faze her. There is the church to turn to for legal advice and the Washington, D.C., office of the honesty group. The Washington office is taking on the CIA and the Drug Enforcement Administration.

The group says the CIA probe concerns "a score of former charter airlines owners" who say they have been forced out of business by CIA-owned airline companies. The drug agency matter, says the group, involves a 1979 Justice Department report alleging, among other things, an agency plot to murder the president of Panama.

If the honesty group is new to the snooping business, the Church of Scientology has a long history of it, apparently born as long ago as 1954 when the church's application for tax-exempt status ran into federal opposition.

The status eventually was approved but the Food and Drug Administration spent another 10 years hauling the church in and out of federal court. The issue was statements of success for a simple electrical device (called an E-meter) used in church self-improvement courses. The courses cost money, hence FDA's concern. The issue was never resolved and the church still uses its E-meter.

Deep into the FDA fight, the church set up a tabloid newspaper called *Freedom*. It lists a circulation of 350,000. It does a lot of investigative reporting, much of it directed at the federal government.

Last summer, more than a hundred FBI agents staged raids on the church's Washington and Los Angeles offices. Thousands of church-related documents were seized, including some confidential files on the tabloid's sources of information. The FBI said the church and its newspaper had "illegally" obtained some government documents, including material on the CIA, FBI and IRS.

Sharp's Austin office makes the Texas capital one of 20 cities in nine states with a government honesty office "drop" for sensitive government materials and information. The church goal is a nationwide "network" to accommodate government "whistleblowers."

Funding is slight: It comes from \$10 annual memberships, mainly from Scientologists. Sharp says the Texas branch has 150 members.